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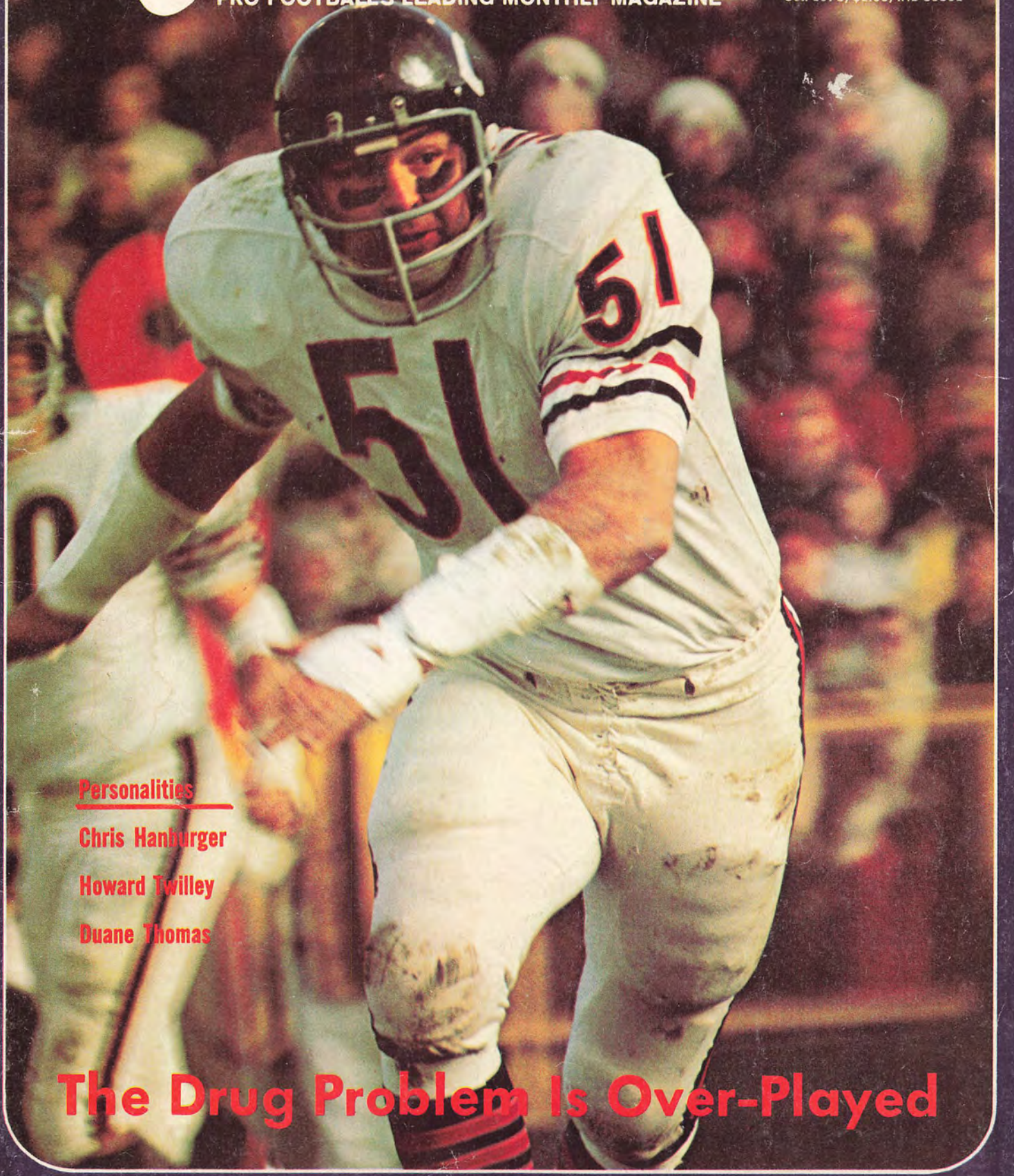

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October 1973, Volume 3, Number 9

PRO QUARTERBACK

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Johnny Rodgers

By Don Freeman

What Makes Johnny Run?

■ Johnny Rodgers is just beginning his career as a running back in professional football but he's done a lot of running already. He ran well enough at Nebraska to win the Heisman Trophy. He ran well enough to be selected the first round draft choice of the San Diego Chargers.

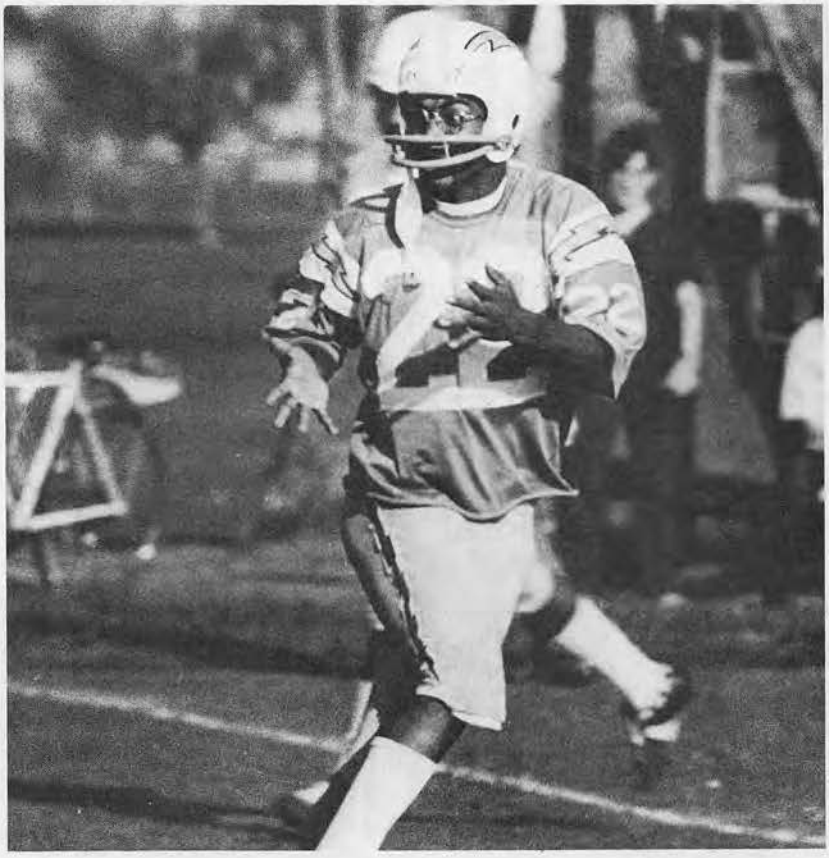
But he kept on running. He ran north, right out of the country and into the arms of the CFL and the Montreal Alouettes.

The NFL was shocked with his sudden departure. So were the San Diego Chargers. Why scarcely two months before Rodgers had been wearing granny glasses under his Charger helmet with the lightning bolt emblazoned across the side. On his jersey was the number 22, which is significant. It was Johnny Rodgers' first day in a San Diego Chargers' uniform and they had given him a number to awaken memories—a number worn in the past by the scampering Dickie Post and, before him, by Keith Lincoln, the most storied of all Charger runners. That's how much they thought of Rodgers.

It was a pleasant sunny day in early March, a day for the rookies to assemble for a brief indoctrination session at the Stardust Country Club practice field in San Diego's Mission Valley.

Someone asked Johnny how he felt. He had just left the wintry snows of Nebraska and he smiled at the question. "I feel better out here," Rodgers said. "Back there in Nebraska it is so cold. The 'hawk' is tough back there. He was looking for me every day."

The hawk? Why, that is the cold bird which carries with him the numbing chills of a midwestern winter.



Johnny Rodgers was happy to be rid of the 'hawk,' if only for a day or two. He romped around the field, under that warming San Diego sun, catching passes, running wind sprints and looking every inch the All-American, Heisman Trophy winning athlete that he is. When he stepped on a scale, it registered 178, his regular playing weight, and he confided that he really wasn't yet in top form, physically.

"The flu," he explained. "I've been sick with a touch of the flu for about the last three months. I was sick even when I played in the Orange Bowl. I think I only weighed about 160 pounds that day."

That day, playing against Notre Dame, Rodgers only scored four touchdowns himself and passed for a fifth. If he was hampered by illness, Notre Dame sure didn't notice.

Johnny Rodgers

Day of 1971. There was his runback of a kick that destroyed Alabama in the Orange Bowl of '72. And, of course, those devastating four touchdowns that demoralized Notre Dame this past New Year's.

Steve Bisheff of the *San Diego Evening Tribune* remembers covering the UCLA-Nebraska game last fall when Rodgers made two cuts where there obviously wasn't any room to cut and then he scurried untouched into the end zone.

"Did you see what I saw?" an incredulous Bisheff asked a fellow scribe.

"I think so," the other replied, "but I'm not sure."

It is like that when you watch Johnny Rodgers. There are feints within feints and the eyes call for confirmation.

Off the field, however, Johnny Rodgers made other moves and those, too, were unfortunately part of the record. But they produced ink in the papers —involvement in a holdup, a felony conviction and probation; an arrest for possession of marijuana, cleared for lack of evidence, and a traffic violation. Two comparatively minor scrapes and one not so minor. These troubles surfaced again when the nation's top football players were being weighed by 1,100 sports writers and TV-radio people to determine the "outstanding college player" and winner of the 1972 Heisman Trophy.

There were those who insisted that Rodgers' other record, the one on the police blotter, should preclude him from consideration as an unworthy example for youngsters to emulate. His fellow athletes were more sympathetic. "When I read in columns that Johnny shouldn't get the Heisman and that I was the type who really deserved it, I felt bad," said O.J. Simpson, the 1968 winner. "I just narrowly missed getting into some scrapes myself . . . and so did everybody else from the ghettos." And Oklahoma's Greg Pruitt, who would finish second to Rodgers in the balloting, said beforehand: "If people voted against Johnny because of his troubles, I wouldn't have wanted to win it that way."

"People don't understand," Rodgers says. "When you grow up where I did, you have a million chances to give up hope or mess up your life. I go home now, to North Omaha, and a lot of guys, all of them good athletes at one time, stop me and say, 'I should have made it but . . .' They made their mistakes and never did make it off the streets. I was lucky. I only made one big mistake. And I was able to overcome it. I'm very proud of that."

Although 377 of those who voted saw fit to rate him no higher than third, Rodgers led the balloting in every section of the country. Winning the Heisman was, for Rodgers, a singularly gratifying reward in the wake of several trying years in which he developed from his period of confusion into maturity. The product of an Omaha ghetto, Rodgers was raised by his mother and grew up in the midst of turbulence and troubles. It was on the last day of his freshman year at Nebraska that Rodgers joined some friends in a holdup which netted $90 and subsequent probation—"it was really just a prank," says Rodgers—and, in the wake of this, the continuing harrassment, Rodgers insists, by the police of Lincoln.

"They haven't done anything to offend me," Johnny says, "but they're there all the time, dropping in on my apartment at all hours—at 1 or 2 or 3 in the morning. They give me this jive about people complaining about the noise, that the music is too loud. Sometimes they say my dog is barking, too. How can that be when I'm asleep?"

Conscious of both his image and of his ability to set an example, Rodgers frequently drove the 100 miles to Omaha from Lincoln to visit his old high school and his old neighborhood, imploring the kids to get an education and to stay out of trouble. "If the kids on the street see that I did it, I think I can be a good example to them instead of a bad one."

He notes, ruefully: "I don't think you should judge me at 21 for what I did at 17."

Johnny Rodgers, late in May, suddenly whirled, cut and made his longest run—clear out of the country. Offered a three-year, no-cut contract said to be in excess of $100,000 a year, he signed with the Montreal Alouettes of the Canadian Football

Rodgers: "If I was as big as other people, I probably couldn't do a lot of things I do out there. The big thing is quickness."

Johnny Rodgers

League. He would be that league's highest paid player.

Into the Canadian sunset Johnny Rodgers ran, leaving the Chargers and the NFL out in the cold.

"I wanted to play for the Chargers," says Rodgers. "If they would have offered me even $50,000 less than Montreal, I would have signed with San Diego. But they never even got that close. I don't think the Chargers thought I was serious about going to Canada. I think they thought I was bluffing."

He was not.

The Alouettes, as early as April 1972, began pursuing the versatile Rodgers. They weren't to catch him for 13 months. Once Rodgers senior year eligibility was reestablished after he was declared temporarily ineligible after an off-campus indiscretion, the Alouettes slowed down their pursuit.

But following Rodgers' amazing Orange Bowl performance against Notre Dame, the Alouettes stepped up their low key approach to sign Rodgers, realizing he would not want to commit himself prior to the NFL draft. The approach was to make him aware of the Alouettes and of the CFL.

Once the "opposition" in the NFL was established—San Diego—the Alouettes flew Johnny and his agent's attorney to Montreal prior to his visiting San Diego. Rodgers received the red carpet treatment. He met with Alouette head coach Marv Levy, general manager J.I. Albrecht and president-owner Samuel Berger.

Johnny was provided with a microscopic view of Montreal in a whirlwind 48-hour visit. Finances were discussed and a ten day decision time limit was agreed upon. Money was important, but so were other things. "Money's not the most important thing," he was quoted by Fred Roberts in the *Montreal Star*. "I'm looking for security over a long period of time." He also looked over Montreal to see "how black athletes are accepted here, what type of a man Marv Levy is and how I'll like the city."

He apparently found all the right answers. By May 25, Rodgers had turned his back upon the San Diego contract offers, and signed a three year pact rumored to be in excess of six figures with triple pay if he is cut or traded.

Rodgers' agents said the disparity between the San Diego and Montreal offers was so great that there was no contest. San Diego claimed their offer would have made Rodgers the year's highest-paid first-round draft choice.

Rodgers is the second Heisman Trophy winner to come to Canada directly out of college. Billy Vessels in 1953 was brought up north by the Edmonton Eskimos. Terry Baker played briefly for Edmonton after winning the Heisman Trophy at Oregon State but playing his first two years with the Los Angeles Rams.

Owner Berger was elated with Rodgers' signing. He was quoted in the *Star* as saying: "It's particularly gratifying to me that Johnny decided in our favor. We've been accused of being cheap, of pinching pennies. My policy has always been not to squander money through mismanagement. There was never a question of saving money where a good ball player was concerned."

Head coach Levy described Rodgers in the *Star* as "a guy who runs into a group of people and comes flying out the other side with the ball. I watched him and I kept saying to myself: 'How did he ever break all those tackles?' "

The Alouettes feel they have nabbed an instant superstar. The Alouettes are in desperate need of a superstar. Many people feel the Alouettes outplayed San Diego in order to save their franchise which has lost $1 million in three years. The Alouettes are hoping a superstar like Rodgers can bring in an additional 10,000 people per game. PQ

Rodgers: "It's always a brain war between the receiver and the backs on defense. I think it's safe to say I won those little wars out there."